

**GOD'S
LOVE**
FOR THE
REST OF US



VINCE ANTONUCCI

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God's Love for the Rest of Us

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1

DEAD PEOPLE

THERE ARE DEAD PEOPLE who are not fully dead. They're kind of alive. They're like walking dead people. And they're everywhere. It seems like every day there are more people who walk around like they're fully alive, but really they're mostly dead.

I'm talking about *real* life. But this does *also* happen to be what's going on in a movie called *Warm Bodies*.

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Warm Bodies is set in a zombie apocalypse.* The main character is a zombie named R. He used to be human and alive, but now he's a zombie and mostly dead, and all he can remember of his name is the letter *R*.

R finds himself wanting to eat humans, but not only for physical sustenance. When he eats people, he experiences their memories, and it makes him feel alive for a moment. Really what R wants is to feel alive.

One day R sees a group of humans, and he finds himself attracted to a girl named Julie.** Later, when Julie is distracted by something, R eats her boyfriend. (Which is . . . one way to do it. The girl you like has a guy already? Eat him.) R's attraction to Julie grows, and soon

*I know that zombie movies are dark and weird, and that might make you uncomfortable. (It might make *me* uncomfortable!) But our culture's obsession with zombies may hint at a recognition that there's something dead about us. And it may help people to realize that what we need is new life. Stick with me on this movie illustration and you'll see what I mean.

**Not the way I'm attracted to Krispy Kreme donuts. He doesn't want to eat her; he wants to date her. The attraction is "romantical," as Mike Wazowski from the kid's movie *Monsters, Inc.* might say. (First a zombie movie; now a monster movie. Up next: a rabid-gerbil movie?)

he rescues her from the other zombies. To keep her safe, he takes her back to the abandoned airplane he lives in at an airport that is filled with hordes of zombies. And there are more of the “undead” arriving there every day.

That’s how the movie begins, but I want to be clear: a few paragraphs ago I was talking about real life. There are people who walk around like they’re alive, but they’re mostly dead. They are walking, living, dead people. And there are more all the time.

Turns out it’s always been that way.

You Will Surely Die

The Bible says it started back in the Garden of Eden. Whether we take the story literally or figuratively, either way God is teaching us something foundational about the human condition. We’re told that God created two people, Adam and Eve, and he gave them Paradise to live in. He gave them only one rule. (Isn’t that interesting? When God had the world the way

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he wanted it, there was only one rule. God is not into rules.)

God told them not to eat the fruit of one particular tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If they did, they would die.

You've probably heard the story. Adam and Eve were tempted. They screwed up and did the *one* thing they weren't supposed to do.

God had said the penalty for that was death. If someone made a movie today out of the story of Adam and Eve, this would be the point where you might get excited, because you're about to see two people die. You'd start to wonder, *How does God kill people?* And, *I can't wait to see what kind of special effects they're going to use to show them dying!* Maybe it will be like that scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* where the people kind of melt before our eyes. You'd be like, *Dude, pass the popcorn; Adam and Eve are about to get toasted.*

But if this were a movie, we'd be disappointed. Because it doesn't look like *anything* happened to Adam and Eve. God reprimanded them for what

they'd done, and that's bad. They had to leave the garden paradise they'd been given, and that's bad. But they didn't melt before our eyes. And the earth didn't swallow them up. Adam didn't say, "Ooh, this is the big one! I'm comin' to join you, Elizabeth!" (*Sanford and Son* reference for the over-forty crowd.*) The big death scene didn't happen in this Adam-and-Eve movie. On the surface, the consequences don't seem tragic.

But Adam and Eve *were* dead. When they ate that fruit, when they talked to God later, when they walked out of the Garden, they were dead. They continued to walk around like regular people, but . . . they *were* dead.

We Are Like the Dead

And it's not just Adam and Eve. It's everyone since. We're all walking dead. The Bible talks about this quite a lot, like in Isaiah 59:10: "We are like the dead."

*If you're under forty, you can just ignore me. (Or you can insert a *Saved by the Bell* reference. Your call.)

You may be wondering, *What do you mean there are walking dead people? And in what way were Adam and Eve dead? And what does the Bible mean about us being dead people?*

Honestly, I'm not sure if I understand all this completely. In fact, I bet I don't. But I think I at least get parts of it. And I think the reality is this: we're all dead in all kinds of ways.

Emotionally Dead

For instance, I think many of us are dead—or at least pretty dead—*emotionally*. Can you remember moments in your life when you died emotionally? I can.

I grew up in a pretty crazy home. My father was a professional poker player in Las Vegas, a gambling addict, and a con man.* He was often in trouble, and our family was constantly run-

*Today, after growing up completely *not* as a Christian or churchgoer, I'm a pastor of a church in . . . Las Vegas. Yep, the very place where my father ruined his life and hurt so many people. When you give your life to God, he will write an amazing story with it.

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ning from the consequences. He was also kind of an abusive jerk.

One of my earliest memories is a night when I was maybe five years old. I was asleep but woke up when I heard yelling downstairs. I ran down and saw my father in my mother's face, yelling. I was afraid of what my father might do to my mother, so I tried to pull him away from her. I couldn't move him, but I think my attempt embarrassed him. So instead of doing anything to her, he kicked me into the corner of the room and went after her most prized possession. It was the piano that her mother, who had died when my mom was in college, had left to her. He ripped a piece off it, threw it at my mom, and stormed out of the house. I looked and saw my mother lying on the floor clutching the piece of the piano, crying. I crawled over and tried to console her.

That night I didn't die *physically*, just like Adam and Eve didn't die physically that day in the garden. But I did die *emotionally*. I was in

deep emotional pain, and I thought to myself, *I don't ever want to feel this way again. I would rather not feel anything than have to feel this way. I'd rather be dead than have to experience this again.* And I made a vow to myself that I would no longer care. I wouldn't get close to friends; I wouldn't trust my parents. My ability to experience the emotions I was intended to experience was seriously handicapped that night. I became a walking, living, dead person.

How about you? Do you have moments when you died emotionally?

Relationally Dead

I also think many of us are dead—or at least pretty dead—*relationally*. Somewhere along the line, someone or something killed our ability to trust people and have healthy relationships. As you can imagine, some of my father's actions did this to me. And I think even just moving a lot put some limitations on my ability to develop strong relationships. There have been lots of

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other things too—friends who didn't turn out to be what they seemed, girlfriends who did something behind my back. All of it led me to die relationally.

How about you? Perhaps you had a spouse who took vows committing to you forever, but forever turned out to be a lot shorter than you ever would have imagined. Or you had this coworker you trusted, but he or she completely broke that trust by taking credit for your work or stealing an account that should have been yours. Or maybe it was a parent who wasn't there. Or a boyfriend who said, "I love you," but he was just trying to get something from you.

Whatever, whoever it was, you've learned not to put your trust in people. Your heart has grown hard and cold. And the result is that you're sitting here today, dead.

Spiritually Dead

I think many of us are dead emotionally and many of us are dead relationally, and I *know* that

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many of us are dead *spiritually*. The Bible says in Ephesians 2:1, “Once you were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins.”

This makes sense when you think about death as separation. In physical death, the body is separated from the soul. In emotional death, we are separated from our feelings. And in relational death, we are separated from other people. When the Bible says we're dead spiritually, what it's actually saying is that because of our “disobedience” and “many sins” we are separated from God.

God created us to live in a loving relationship with him. Maybe you've wondered, *What's my purpose? What is life all about? Why am I here?* You are here to love God and to be loved by God. *That's* your primary purpose in life, and that's a purpose worth living for. *That's* why God made you. *That's* his plan. His goal is to live in a loving relationship with you. And how awesome is that? It turns out we have a God who loves us and wants our love!

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But there's a problem. For a love relationship to be authentic, each side has to choose to love the other. God has chosen to love you. The problem is, every person who has ever lived has chosen *not* to love God. We've all chosen *not* to do life in a relationship with God but instead to do life on our own.

At first blush you may balk at the idea that you've chosen not to love God. But look at your life. The Bible says that when we choose to do life in relationship with God, our top priorities will be loving him and loving people. Have those consistently been your top priorities? They haven't been mine. The Bible says that when we love God, we will be devoted to obeying his commands. Does that describe how your life has gone? Not mine. The Bible says that God should be the one we worship and trust in and turn to. Is that how you've done life? I haven't. And I think the truth is that we've all chosen to *not* do life in a relationship with God, but instead to do life on our own.

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And God honors our choice. He's too much of a gentleman not to. Because we choose to do life on our own, we separate ourselves from God.

Maybe you realize that. Maybe that's why you're reading this little book. You don't feel close to God. God might be a concept you embrace, but he's not someone whose embrace you've ever felt. You don't experience God. You don't feel his presence or receive his guidance. What you feel is . . . separated from him.

We are like the dead. We're walking dead people.

Not only are many of us dead emotionally, relationally, and spiritually, but we're all dying *physically*. The statistics on death are pretty impressive—one out of one person dies.

You and I are going to die. We don't like to hear that or think about it or talk about it. In fact, we do all kinds of things to avoid thinking and talking about it. And we try to act like we're not scared of it, but we are.

Ever since we were kids, we've been acting

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like we're not scared of dying. I think it starts at about seventh grade. When you're little, you don't mind expressing fear. Then you hit seventh grade and you're too cool, so you have to do things to prove that you're not afraid.

Ever watch a horror movie with seventh graders? They're laughing, going, "That's stupid. Ahhhh, look—his face is falling off!" You know why? Because they're scared kids trying hard to ignore the fear.

I have a friend named Tim who points out that this is also around the time when you start buying "shock your parents" music, which often revolves around death.

Every generation has to have a shock-your-parents kind of musician. Back when I was young, it was KISS. Parents were like, "I don't like KISS. It means Kings in Satan's Service." And it would shock our parents that we liked them, so we'd be all, "Ha, ha. They're my favorite band. That proves that I'm not afraid. I have no fear." Or there was Alice Cooper, who bit the heads off

things.* Or Ozzy Osborne . . . who *also* bit the heads off of things. Later, if you were a seventh grader and wanted to prove how tough you were, you'd go out and buy a Marilyn Manson album.

It's like there's a committee who approaches this artist: "Sir, um, you're a musician, and well, the seventh graders need a shock-your-parents type of musician so they can feel tough. Could you do it?" The guy sighs and says, "Yeah, I guess I'll do it. Give me a rabies shot and something to bite the head off of." The committee celebrates: "Yeah, we've got our man!"

Kids do all kinds of things to try to act like they're not afraid of death.

And we still do it as adults. That's why we don't think or talk about death. We pretend we're not afraid of dying, but we are. And the reality is that we *are* going to die.

So, now do you see what I'm talking about? There are dead people. But they're not fully

*Actually, he didn't really. But everybody said he did, which in rock and roll is pretty much the same thing.

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dead. They're kind of alive. They're *walking* dead people. And they're everywhere.

Maybe you don't like to think of *yourself* that way. I'm sure you don't. But is it possible that you're dead and just haven't realized it? You've never come to terms with it, but there is a very real sense in which you're dead emotionally, relationally, and spiritually, and someday you'll be dead physically.

Kind of like the movie. These zombies, including R, are dead, but they're *walking* dead. Which sounds like the typical zombie movie, but *Warm Bodies* has a twist.

A Dead Person Comes Alive

You remember that R takes Julie back to the airplane he lives in. Well, in the airplane, they bond, and R finds himself coming back to life. Julie's love is slowly giving him new life.

In fact, there's a scene where *other* zombies see Julie and R holding hands, and even just *seeing* this act of love changes the other zombies.

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Seeing love starts to slowly give them new life. Later, Julie and R find themselves in a situation where they're being attacked, and to escape, they have to jump into a pool far below them. When they come out, Julie kisses R, and that's when it happens. R is made alive. Her *love* brings him back to life.

A dead person *can* come back to life. Real love—even just *seeing* it—can start to slowly give a person new life. And I'm *not* talking about the movie. I'm talking about real life.

See, what the Bible tells us is that becoming a Christian is not about God making a *bad* person *good*; it's about making a *dead* person *alive*.¹ God resurrected Jesus from death to life, and he wants to do the same for us.*

*By the way, I used to think the idea that Jesus literally rose from the dead was a nice little myth that Christians conveniently believed in. Then I looked at the evidence. Yes, *evidence*. I actually came to believe in Jesus by studying the evidence. Many people have, including Harvard Law professors, scientists, archeologists, and a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist. If you're not sure about the Resurrection or the rest of the story the Bible tells, I would encourage you to examine the evidence. There are some great books that can help you with that, like *More Than a Carpenter*, by Josh McDowell; *The Case for Christ*, by Lee Strobel; and *The Reason for God*, by Tim Keller.

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I want to make sure that gets tattooed on your brain. So please read it again:

Becoming a Christian is not about God making a bad person good; it's about God making a dead person alive.

And the Bible says that the way God does that is through *love*. God loves you. He's always loved you. And if you let him love you, God's love will bring you from death to life.

If you wanted to describe me at twenty years old, *dead* would have been a great word. I was dead emotionally, relationally, and spiritually. But I found God (or God found me), and I let him love me, and he dramatically changed my life. He's resurrected me from the dead. He's made me alive and given me new life. I'm not completely where I need to be yet, but the more I let God love me, the closer I get.

When you let God love you, he goes to work in your life resurrecting you spiritually,

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emotionally, and relationally. And as you let God pour his love into you, his love will start to spill out of you, allowing others to experience God's love through you. In fact, Jesus said that people would come to know him through seeing the love his followers have for this world and especially for each other.² Even *seeing* real love can start to slowly give a person new life.

That's the idea of Christianity.

You may be thinking, *No—I know about Christianity and about Christians, and it's not about love. It's about boycotts, politics, and judging people.* I understand why you feel that way, because there are some Christians (or people who call themselves Christians) who do it wrong and give Christianity a bad name. And I apologize for that. But that's not what Christianity is about. Don't let some messed-up people keep you from experiencing the thing you really need, which is the love of God that will make you alive and give you a new life.

Let's look at what the Bible says in a book

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called Ephesians. Ephesians 1:18 reads, “I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light so that you can understand the confident hope he has given to those he called—his holy people who are his rich and glorious inheritance.”

The prayer here is that we would understand the value God places on us. Yes, we’ve screwed up. Yes, we’re messed up. But in a sense, it doesn’t matter. Because God still views us as treasures. We’re “his rich and glorious inheritance.”

That passage continues in Ephesians 1:19-20: “I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God’s power for us who believe him. This is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honor at God’s right hand in the heavenly realms.”

The power God uses in our lives and makes available to us is incredibly great. It’s “mighty power.” It’s the power God used to raise Jesus from physical death to new life on the first

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Easter Sunday. He now uses that same power to raise us from spiritual death to new life.

Why? Why does God make this offer to us? In the next chapter we read, in Ephesians 2:4-5, “God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God’s grace that you have been saved!)”

The Bible says God did this because “he loved us so much.” God’s love is not just for the good, the pious, the religious. God’s love is for the rest of us. God’s love is for *you*.

It says that God is “rich in mercy.” His posture toward you is not one of condemnation, but of compassion.

It says we are saved “by God’s grace.” Grace means getting something better than you deserve. We’ve screwed up, we’re messed up, but it doesn’t matter, because of grace.

The Bible says that by grace we have been “saved.” I’m going to get real geeky for a

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minute. I apologize for this, but my mother was an English teacher. In Greek, the original language of the New Testament, that word “saved” is written in the perfect tense.

Do you remember from school that verbs can be past tense, present tense, future tense, or a perfect tense?

Past tense indicates something that has already happened.

Present tense indicates something that is happening right now.

Future tense indicates something that will happen eventually but hasn't yet.

The perfect tense in Greek refers to something that has happened in the past but has an ongoing impact in the present and into the future. Using the perfect tense draws attention to the continuing effects of something that has happened in the past.

And *saved* is written in the perfect tense. How cool is that?

The idea is that you were saved from death,

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from being separated from God, all at once in the past, but the effect of that is continuing in your life. God will continually do his resurrecting work in your life until it's finally complete.

That means you never have to feel defeated, and you should never give up!

You may have “gotten saved” awhile back, and you're confused because there are still parts of your life where you feel dead. Don't lose hope. God is perfect, his love for you is perfect, and he saved you in the perfect tense. That means his work in you isn't done yet! God is still at work in you, bringing life out of death.

On the cross, Jesus died and absorbed our death. Then he defeated our death by his resurrection. And that same resurrection-from-the-dead-kind-of-power is available to you.

God can love you from death to life.

He wants to love you.

The only question is: Will you let him?

Will You Let Him?

A pastor named Michael Brown tells a story that illustrates God's love and the choice we have in how to respond to it:

A friend told me about a boy who was the apple of his parents' eyes. Tragically, in his mid-teens, the boy's life went awry. He dropped out of school and began associating with the worst kind of crowds. One night he staggered into his house at 3:00 A.M., completely drunk. His mother slipped out of bed and left her room. The father followed, assuming that his wife was in the kitchen, perhaps crying. Instead he found her at her son's bedside, softly stroking his matted hair as he lay passed out drunk on the covers. "What are you doing?" the father asked, and the mother simply answered, "He won't let me love him when he's awake."³

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The question is: Will you let God love you?

Will you accept the possibility that you're dead? And that what you need more than anything is for God to love you, to bring you back to life.

God wants to love you.

Will you let him?